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## The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement

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## Book Reviews

*The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement*, by Julie Roy Jeffrey. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xii, 311 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY JENNIFER HARBOUR, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

In her study of American antebellum and wartime abolitionism, Julie Roy Jeffrey argues that "ordinary" women formed the essential foundation of the movement to eradicate slavery. Chiding historians for ignoring the muted masses of female abolitionists, Jeffrey challenges scholars to consider how abolitionism might have become marginalized if ordinary women had not pursued reformist roles. If it were not for these women, Jeffrey hypothesizes, abolitionism probably would have engendered less societal change.

Jeffrey's sources include newspaper articles, diaries, and organizational records (from an array of antislavery societies), all drawn largely from archives in the Northeast. Due to the paucity of sources on African American women, Jeffrey relies heavily on the monumental collection of primary material found in C. Peter Ripley's edited collection, *The Black Abolitionist Papers* (1991). It is Jeffrey's clever interpretation of letters authored by "ordinary," white, middle-class women, however, that immediately draws readers' attention to the changing nature of antebellum and wartime womanhood.

In six chapters organized chronologically and thematically, Jeffrey examines the family life, domestic structures, economic status, religious affiliation, and labor patterns of female abolitionists. In doing so, she highlights the commonalities, rather than the incongruities, shared by her subjects, the majority of whom believed that the annihilation of chattel slavery was a moral and religious obligation and an eventual certainty. In her chapter on methods used to recruit women into the abolitionist movement, Jeffrey posits that women gained new skills that would take them "far from the kitchen and the parlor" (52), traversing the seemingly unbridgeable gap between public and private in the antebellum North. Abolitionist leaders enticed women to join by devising a campaign that focused on both class and gender; illustrations and broadsides encouraged white, middle-class women to consider their fellow bondwomen as fellow Americans who were being denied the "rights, privileges, and protections" (41) accorded to all

women. Although abolitionism was unpopular (and often dangerous), women became involved by distributing antislavery propaganda, enlisting others in the cause, creating women's antislavery societies, and pressuring ministers to maintain an interest.

Based on her readings of individual and institutional records, Jeffrey maintains that women's involvement in abolitionism was especially formidable in rural areas and small villages, where Protestantism was largely responsible for creating and maintaining bonds. Female activism never took any one single form; instead, women's contributions to the antislavery effort varied according to their familial obligations and socioeconomic status. Women who were not able to organize or attend large functions (because they could not afford it or because they worked outside of the home) made their mark in other significant ways, ranging from sewing potholders with antislavery messages to leaving extra food in their barn for fugitive slaves. These things could generally be done in the course of a woman's daily chores, thereby allowing single women with children and women of the lower classes to participate in reformist activities. Finally, Jeffrey argues, abolitionist women became even more deeply committed to the cause of slaves in the face of a changing political climate and the coming of the Civil War. In particular, women who attended speeches, fairs, and meetings gained new argumentation and oration skills not previously available to them in their private, domestic sphere.

Jeffrey's discussion of African American women is interspersed throughout the text, a decision that is at once laudable and problematic. As she notes, "In comparison to the material on white women, evidence for black women's participation is scanty. . . . their voices are more muted in this book than I would have wished" (8). Nonetheless, Jeffrey manages to highlight the careers of Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, both prominent African American women abolitionists. Jeffrey also uncovers material on African American churches, newspapers, fund-raising fairs, and Underground Railroad activities. But the work lacks a critical analysis of racism among women in white antislavery societies. Jeffrey only mentions this virulent prejudice, which clearly played a role in the growth of separate abolitionist factions—one black and one white—with differing goals. Moreover, despite Jeffrey's attempt to create a survey of American abolitionism, the scope of the work is limited to the Northeast.

Nonetheless, Jeffrey's work is a breath of fresh air for abolitionist and Civil War historiography, which have for too long focused on the warwork of the upper-class men whose gender and class allowed them unequalled access to the public, political arena. As Jeffrey's thoughtful

and carefully researched book shows; women who led the abolitionist movement adroitly integrated their household and church activities with their reformist activities. In developing strategies to eradicate slavery, these "ordinary" women traversed the divide between public and private to experience their own unique politicization.

*Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair*, by Beverly Gordon. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xxvii, 285 pp. Illustrations, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY KAREN J. BLAIR, CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Beverly Gordon argues that the history of women's fund-raising fairs has remained invisible to researchers despite the fairs' tenacity in American culture from their inception in Baltimore in 1827 to the present day. In *Bazaars and Fair Ladies*, she traces their 200-year development, using bazaars in two communities—Madison, Wisconsin, and Northampton, Massachusetts—as representative of a general phenomenon, with numerous additional examples of fairs from other communities in the Northeast and Midwest. A professor in the Department of Environment, Textiles, and Design at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Gordon focuses on artifacts, such as the booths at the fairs and the products they sold, the costumes worn by saleswomen, and decorations in the hall. She examines these artifacts for the information afforded by the materials and their design and construction. Eighty-three images, mostly illustrations from nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Home Companion*, embellish her survey. Among these are a Red Cross tent used for a booth; dolls and handkerchiefs made by volunteers; exotic fans, parasols and lanterns imported for sale or auction; price lists for Confederate Memorial Bazaar products; quilters demonstrating needlework skills in colonial costume; and paintings and flags on display.

Gordon begins with a survey of antebellum benevolent and anti-slavery fairs designed to earn profits for civic projects or social causes. Comfortable matrons sponsored the sale of homemade aprons, jellies, cakes, potholders, lemonade, wine, and ice cream by attractive young single saleswomen. Gordon asserts that the male shoppers were ensnared by the sexual allure of "bewitching salesmen" (36) to purchase trinkets they did not need. Men ignored the social expectation that woman's place was in the home, not challenging behavioral norms by engaging in commerce.

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